

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (Routledge, 2015)*

Kristen J. Warner's *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* provides an important understanding of the shortcomings of colorblind casting, a widespread industry practice used to increase the number of racial minorities on America film and television. Colorblind casting (or blind casting) is the process of hiring actors of color to play (mostly minor) roles that could be played by actors of any race, and to play characters of a minority race or ethnicity other than their own if they look similar to members of that race or ethnicity. Warner examines both the process and the results of colorblind casting. She argues persuasively that blind casting is well intentioned, but that the results – more actors of color onscreen, but playing normative roles (written for whites) and unintended racial stereotypes – are actually detrimental rather than a progressive way to increase both the quantity and the quality of racially diverse representations.

Warner uses a variety of research methods to investigate the process of blind casting, and she ends with a comparative analysis of colorblind cast and race-conscious cast television dramas. She combines field research results (from observations of casting sessions and from personal interviews with Hollywood guild representatives and casting executives) with the insights and concerns of critical race and whiteness theorists and media scholars (such as Gary Peller, Stuart Hall, Richard Dyer, Herman Gray, and Sasha Torres). She also examines social media postings (by fans and casting directors), and she analyses the colorblind-cast dramas *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC 2005-) and *The Vampire Diaries* (CW 2009-2016), and the alternative color- and race-conscious dramas *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC 1993-1999) and *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008).

The Preface and Introduction explain how colorblind casting aligns with and promotes the equally detrimental cultural politics behind the notion of a colorblind society. Warner's Preface notes how colorblind casting matches the way she, as a black woman, is expected to blend into America's supposed colorblind society and become invisible, even though, like actors of color, she 'can never be invisible or completely blend in' (xii) because what is labelled normal in a supposed colorblind society is actually white both 'on television and in the "real world"' (xiii).

The Introduction explains how character roles that are ostensibly 'race neutral', 'normative' and 'universal', and can thus seemingly be played by actors of any race, are actually 'synonymous with white mainstream values' and 'displace the racial and ethnic cultural specificity of the actors portraying them' (2). Warner finds that white values underlying a supposedly race-neutral, colorblind society, in the words of Gary Peller, do not 'threaten white privilege', but do mandate that everyone must 'attempt to succeed on the same terms as whites rather than overturning white definitions of success' regardless of their privileged or disadvantaged status, and propose that the cure for white prejudice is for people of color to become as much like whites as possible (5). Warner's 'idea of racial progress' does not match the colorblind norm of people of color blending into a white society designed for whites, and does not mean having more people of color on film and television screens acting white. Instead, she defines racial progress in terms of a 'more authentic depiction of America', with 'characters of color [who are as] multidimensional and culturally specific' as the actors who play them (6). Instead of colorblind casting, Warner would like to see 'culturally-specific casting' (27) that recognises white cultural norms as white and highlights the many cultural differences among people of color instead of neutralising them into normative white roles.

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Chapter One begins with the recognition that television ‘has the daily power to reinforce attitudes or reshape them’ (31) and that colorblind ‘casting functions as a mode of cultural production that shapes and maintains racial hierarchies’ by assuming white is the American norm into which everyone can and wants to fit (32). This chapter examines who and what are responsible for the widespread practice of colorblind casting. Hiring power, Warner finds, is in the hand of casting directors, but television producers and film directors make the final decisions (39), and scriptwriters are accountable for the roles they create (50). Most decision makers believe blind casting is an easy way to reflect American diversity, without having to discuss race and with no need to care whether or not the actor is the same race and ethnicity as the character. Warner notes that colorblind casting answers to media watchdog groups and benefits guilds and actors of color, to the extent that they have prioritised gainful employment for actors of color; that it benefits television networks, to the extent that they can use colorblind casting to include more actors of color in order to avoid protests and boycotts; and that it benefits white actors, who remain centre stage, and white audiences, who like seeing themselves centre stage, and on whom network television advertising still depends. Warner also reveals the substantial disadvantages inherent in colorblind casting: it does nothing to promote knowledge about America’s multicultural diversity, it confuses the American public and even casting directors regarding who actually belongs to what race and ethnicity and what cultural values they bring to America, and it erases the cultural identities of people of color.

Recent and current primetime scripted television dramas get individual attention in the next three chapters, beginning with *Grey’s Anatomy*, as case study examples of how colorblind-cast dramas differ from race-conscious alternatives. Warner credits *Grey’s Anatomy*’s black female showrunner Shonda Rhimes for creating a blind-cast television drama that includes a multitude of racial minority characters in an integrated work place, and for treating white characters and characters of color equally regarding screen time and social and occupational status (67). She also criticises Rhimes for completely ignoring racial issues in favour of depicting supposedly race-neutral issues of family dynamics, hospital emergencies, and individual ambitions and personality quirks; for depicting interracial romances that never acknowledge racial differences (69); and for relying on her characters’ tacit assimilation to white normality to depict their ‘racial transcendence’ (84). In blaming Rhimes for failing to ‘depict the world as it actually is’ in favour of depicting racial difference as visible color differences only, Warner finds that *Grey’s Anatomy* ‘provides audiences and networks the opportunity to feel diverse while maintaining white as the standard that characters of color must adopt if they desire to remain successful’ (87, 88).

In her chapter on Julie Plec and Kevin Williamson’s *The Vampire Diaries*, Warner focuses on how the blind-cast race change of a lead character, from white (in the original book series) to black, resulted in what fans criticised as racial discrimination against the show’s only woman of color (97). This, and this character’s repeated slippage into racial stereotypes, Warner offers as examples of some of the possible pitfalls when a role ‘written for a normatively white character ... becomes racially and historically loaded once an actor of color takes the role’ (110).

Warner’s chapter on ‘Alternatives to Colorblind Casting’ examines both *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and *The Wire* (created by white showrunners Barry Levinson and Tom Fontana, and David Simon respectively) as race-conscious alternatives to the colorblind ‘arbiters of whiteness’ by providing ‘culturally diverse characterizations of minorities’ (134). Warner notes, for example, that conversations between the racially diverse Baltimore police department detectives in *Homicide* are often about racial issues, including colorism (142) and how they

understand the legacy of slavery differently (143-4). And in *The Wire*, which also ‘includes people of color in lead and supporting’ roles (144), depictions reveal how ‘race shapes the experiences of each person as well as their positions, institutionally and socially’ (146). In these television dramas, Warner concludes, minority characters are written as minority characters and then cast with actors ‘whose experiences both racially and culturally enrich the characterizations’, in direct contrast to the ‘prototypical normatively white characterizations written for all characters, regardless of race’ in colorblind cast dramas (146-7). These race-conscious dramas are, to Warner, examples of rare yet essential alternatives from an industry that is increasingly embracing a post-racial ideology that sustains white hegemony.

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